The Modalities of Meaning in Graphic Design

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COMMON
GROUND

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Abstract: This proposal is about the visual semiotics in the specific context of graphic design. Graphic design has become one of the most important communication disciplines and its expression discourses have incidence in all the cultural contexts: politics, advertising, education, information, recreational activities and even environment and special spaces. That is the main reason to reflect in the several meanings that society is receiving from the visual messages and the different kind of interpretations that people is doing constantly. This process is changing the way of understanding the world, the other and phenomena like images and objects. Also the designed objects and its messages make a great impact in different spheres. This has been described as the image phenomenon but it is more complex because, since the semiotic point of view, in the graphic design are combined the morphologic, typographic, chromatic and photographic codes, some of them emerge from established languages and others become languages or meta-languages. Graphic design cannot be studied since syntagmatic concepts, its meaning modalities belong to paradigmatic dynamics; neither can be understood since the communication semiotic, it is a signification semiotic target. This is comprehended from visual grammar ideas to graphic discourses, all of them have been made conditional from the modalities of meaning: conceptual, connotative, social, affective, reflected and thematic meanings. The results of this reflection will create the main basis from the visual communication and its transcendence to semiotics as a frame of reference for the humanities.

Keywords: Semiotics, Graphic Design, Meaning

Graphic Design, a Complex Discipline

ON OF THE most important fundamentals for the understanding of the phenomenon of graphic design is its comprehension as a task of the spirit, given that in this discipline, the entire human being acts, and the results come from the power of personal life related to the singular aspect of the practical tendencies. (DILTHEY, 1997: 39-51) In graphic design, we act from instinctive sensibility and artistic inducement; therefore, when analyzing it from the methodological principals of natural sciences, one will not enter a conceptual differentiation immersed in a possible hermeneutic vision in which parameters such as history, language, dialogue and game are included.

Therefore, it is necessary to explain graphic design from this point of view: it is a discipline that belongs to graphic communication and visual communication as well as the environment of all the tasks that are inserted in the communicative act, whose essence cannot be understood entirely under the patterns of observation, justification, logical argumentation and demonstration, because it shares terms of humanist tradition, domains of social sciences and art, all of which turn this task into an epistemological complex.

The rules of reason are applied in graphic design in those terms that allow the comprehension of space and form – under mathematical, geometrical and perceptual basis -, as well as some parameters of the chromatic sense – under the principles of physical optics -, in the framework of social sciences, quantitative models of sociological, psychological and pedagogic knowledge are used, and in terms of formation, culture is alluded to, to designate specific modes of expression of the messages: sense of taste, aesthetic experience, sensible relation, semantic indications and group values, narrating acts of the subject, that can only be submitted to interpretation, to qualitative elements of reflection, and to the anthropologic idea of culture, to the formation understood in this ambit as visual culture.

Among the basic categories that facilitate the understanding of graphic design as a science of the spirit, we have *Bildung's* (formation) "which designates the specifically human mode of giving form to man's dispositions and natural abilities" (GADAMER, 1996: 35), this discipline, as an important aspect of the visual culture of humans, is understood as a practical knowledge (*phronesis*) directed toward concrete situations, guided by both creative ability (*dynamis*) as by a form of wisdom (*sophia*) and knowledge (*epistemé*) of the world.

Visual culture is the result of the subjects' exercising of freedom, manifested in communicative acts materialized in the form of objects, creating the sense of the aesthetic and of the historic, a product of the development of the sensibility and artisticity that presuppose the overcoming of the natural sense, the exercising of freedom of the spirit and of human will, entailing the acknowledgement of demands of judgement and orientation of the common sense, as

keys of the interpolation of the contents of graphic design, sustained in taste, moral judgement whose realization is accepted as an imperative way of knowing and acknowledging by those who perceive a visual message.

Thus graphic design is developed under variables of practical formation in a process that distances itself from immediacy and self-absorption, alluding to otherness, to the possibility of attributions and general interests, whose aesthetic vision, in this practical formation, transcends naturalness. Therefore, this phenomenon is understood here as the hermeneutic task determined as interpretative knowledge that distrusts the immediate sense and the illusion of false conscience when faced with the object, looking for comprehension in semantic terms that discover the direction of expression, explanation and translation that the visual imagery conducts as a mediator between thought and receiver.

Sense in the Designed

The idea of sense in designed objects, as a set of sensible manifestations that form an individual's thought, is the way of understanding something: a purpose, direction or course; the ability to interpret or explain a phenomenon; the good sense.

In graphic design, sense alludes to a semiotic hermeneutic tendency that understands non-verbal messages based on their exegetic conditions as they are presented to us with an intentional character and multiple material, where the phenomenon of semiosis stands out, as visual imagery is due to the multiple meaning and the surplus of meaning that involves depending on both the text and the context.

Semiosis integrates a set of relationships organized by iconic elements in concrete structures determined syntactically by visual text, discourse, environment and context in which a visual image is immersed, from there, different moments of interpretation occur either by the person who builds the sense or the one who choose or ratifies it. Sense is an evidence and it fundaments every intentional task, it is determined as a complex multiple meaning; in order to interpret it, one must acknowledge the basic cultural units in its link: visual text.

Graphic imagery, understanding it as a visual language an visual text, produces meaning through the successive effects of sense, which are possible thanks to specific narrative schemes that regulate the relationships among their different codes and the syntactic organization that, through units called figures, form semantic paths based on possible associations and cultural anchors.

Sense is only understandable based on a dialectic vision of the semantic dynamics: all meaning creates sense and all sense created meaning, all meaning and all sense expand culturally in the form of sign chains.

Sense is understood culturally, no object or visual sign on its own means more than what is in its essence; however, immersed in intentional communication, it is possible for it to acquire other meanings and for the surplus of meaning to be produced, whose independent variables elaborate what has been called reading grilles, that is, semantic transformations that weave complex networks of meaning integrated to the visual memory of the percipients.

This systematization of signs is understood as language because it integrates in its communicative intention form and content, material expression of the sign and its knowledge, graphic design normalizes the principles of its signs, it systematizes them based on conventions, as repertoires that are susceptible to being integrated and nominated as codes whose rules can be interrelated with syntactic limitations and the frontiers of visual grammar.

Based on the previous, we speak of the visual language manifested in organized groups of signs subject to structural rules, making possible relationships that comply with the core of every language: communicability, expressive possibility and a complex conjunction of its visual codes.

The sense of graphic design as a visual language is revealed first as graphic signs -point, line, contour, figure-, then in the articulation of these as a visual text –some circles and lines allow, for example, representing a face -, then in the exhibition of these in some genre of graphic communication –poster, cover, flyer, etc. - and last, in their conceptual limitations in some of the discursive alternatives of graphic communication –advertising, propaganda, educational, etc.-. (VILCHIS, 2004: 15-18)

Bases of Meaning in Graphic Design

The logical order of graphic communication is based on the principles of diagramming and spatiotemporal fragmentation, corresponding to the bases of formal articulation that integrates the visual literacy in morphological, dimensional, and structural elements, in order to build conceptual articulation, which includes laws of composition, structural values, semantic characteristics, degrees of meaning, and representation values.

Secondly, there is the disposition of this visual grammar as a fundament of the morphological, chromatic, typographic and photographic codes that are fixed at the same time in the different editorial, indicative, narrative and ornamental genres in their discursive dimensions.

The condition of graphic communication as a language most certainly sets some of its conditions in the artificial and arbitrary being, in the ability to represent that which is known as "what is real" by means of graphic signs and of understanding them

like such and not in any other way, it is an unnatural way of making thought possible, that which Rudolf Arnheim defines as visual thought (ARNHEIM, 1986).

Visual language has modified the terms in which both learning and communication are understood, because it could be said that nowadays there are images that substitute names and identify as well as the names, they awaken awareness of social and cultural entities and they reinterpret circumstances and experiences. Using graphic communication, man has transcended written language and his culture includes the task of visual perception and of a cognitive assimilation of it, in the construction of non-linguistic symbolic devices that have come to determine nowadays ways of thought, expression, reaction, construction and organization of religious, political and general behaviour models.

The semiosis of visual text is established through the correlation between substances and forms of expression – syntactic structures generated by the possible interrelations between morphological, iconographic, chromatic, typographic and photographic codes, substances and forms of the content – semantic structures with their cultural contents – and the substances and forms of interpretation – pragmatic structures emerging from the relationships of proximity, perception and interpretation between the semanticized object and the interpreting subject, where "semiosis is the action of the sign, the process of meaning, the process through which any given object can be used as a sign of another thing by a person. Someone who interprets a sign infers what it means, by doing so, somehow increases its meaning." (CONESA, 1999: 68) Reality is expressed in the visual text by virtue of the possibility of being perceived, the comprehension of a visual text fixed in a material support is the conscience of the existence of that which is recognized as reality, it is a representation or re-presentation of specific ways of being of subjects and objects.

The semantic ability of visual signs implicitly involves the possibility of establishing identity and, therefore, credibility in a being that is not (in that beings can be represented as fantastic animals), if it is accepted that the visual text is fixed in a material support, its pretension derived from existence.

As visual text is manifested in an object, the designed, the concept from which it emerges –like a fact that refers to a thought being -, the message that sustains it, and the object itself, represent the conditions of objectivity in which the visual text is manifested, the perceptual moment and its possible interpretation allude to subjectivity, the communicative relationship is mediation between subject and object, relationships between objectivity and subjectivity that determine the visual culture.

Intersubjectivity is a duplicate subjectivism and, according to Gadamer, an equivocal concept, which also applies to visual text, which in its communicative function, has inherent moments of intersubjectivity in which mediation is between subject and subject, and from the dialogue between the two arise concepts and interpolations that could never be from a single one, therefore among objectivity-intersubjectivity relationships there is a place for an ideological thought and every concept is mediation between the being and the thought-of being (DEL PALACIO, 2000: 11), where precisely one of the paradigms of graphic communication lies, given the possibility of perversion that occurs in the distance manifested between being, thought-of being and visualized being.

This way semiosis is limited to the concrete manifestations in subjective, objective and intersubjective dimensions of the graphic discourses, unavoidable in an exegetic task that penetrates beyond the action of visually spreading signs, in an interpretative demand that acknowledges the circumstances of graphic communication that are defined attached to the object itself, that defines and explains that which is pertinent and relative to the thought of the subjects who participate in this semiotic phenomenon and the conditions of reciprocity, relative to any type of relationship, dependency or quality concerning the subject.

It is not about a horizontal sequence, the semiosis of graphic design refers to multiple semantic mediations defined between the extremes of the external issuer–designer, designer–internal issuer, internal issuer–receiver, receiver–external issuer in categorizations from one time to another or from one action to another in semantic interpolations that are matters of interpolations of partial sceneries of graphic communication or of graphic communication understood as a syntactic, semantic and pragmatically complex whole.

Modalities of Meaning in Graphic Design

In the course of the communicative action of graphic design, a series of moments that establish different conditions of the dialogue is manifested, a visual discourse is a represented discourse, a direct discourse whose strategy includes the dialogue between external issuer and designer, dialogue and interpretation between designer and message, dialogue between designer and the designed, and last, dialogue between the designed and the receiver, therefore, we can speak of a permanent exegetic relationship. This process may be direct and thematically oriented, represented and adjudicated to a special particular nucleus or an alien one, indicating the intentions of third parties; it is dialogic in that the receiver elabor-

ates questions that must be answered by the issuer of the visual discourse, it can be a dialogue at intervals, synchronic – in the same time and space – or diachronic – in the form of a visual narrative, it can be in a single space and in different times, or in different spaces and temporal sequences.

The understanding of the message in graphic design is always given in a narrow link with the conditions of intentionality, "intentionality is the property of many mental states and events by virtue of which these are directed and are about or of objects and states of things of the world… an intention must be an intention to do something... a trait of directionality" (SEARLE, 1992: 17). Intentionality is directionality and sense, the project immersed in the communicative action of visual text conditions the issuing subject in the determined will for a purpose. The intention determines a way of proceeding and the choosing of a semantic field that conditions the fulfilment of a need immersed first in the conscience of the external issuer and then in the conscience of the he who decides what to say, how to say in a visual text and its materialization as a discursive genre. The need and the message are mediated by a sequence of intentions.

Visual text, as it gathers the complexity of graphic communication codes is shaped as the maximum units of its determinants, discourse is conditioned by the purposes that it is destined to, it is a deliberate and intentional form of proceeding and it comprises specific and characteristics ways of constructing and organizing the messages, it is defined by factors of pertinence such as the rhetoric reference, both eidetic and pragmatic, where sense occurs in the framework of similitude and the coexistence of languages that have been transcended their self and that express a beyond-their-selves as codes.

Thus a typology of visual discursive is integrated, where the identified forms are expressed graphically because they have visual and perceptual characterization that unchains localized and conditioned actions in the subconscious of the subjects who perceive. The discursive forms of visual text are considered a taxonomy that is defined based on the intentional diversity of the messages, thus the following are included:

- Commercial purpose, in which the object, based on a rhetoric of seduction, persuasion and conviction, incites the subject to consume based on subjective conditions, it transcends to the rhetoric of the perturbing commotion of the subject's conscience, the rhetoric of evocation that refers to the mnemonic possibilities in a rescue of fantasy limited by subconscious memories an the rhetoric of the pseudo-feasibility that shows as verisimilar facts the possible consequences of consumption in the subject's emotional associations with his unconscious aspirations.

- Political purpose, which in a propagandistic discourse carries to its possible consequences the rhetoric of implication, which invites social activism, the rhetoric of denunciation, which presumes to show the true face of a conflict, the rhetoric of opposition, which faces situations of ambiguity or opposition for a supposed election on behalf of the subject, the rhetoric of exaltation, which glorifies figures or events, and the rhetoric of commemoration, which invites nostalgic remembrance.

- Educational purpose, integrator of the possible relationships between the designed and the subject that in under learning conditions or didactic communication, whose resources are the rhetoric of education whose interpretation is conducted based on systematized and formally programmed terms and the rhetoric of information that informs the subject of something with no claims to any behavioural modification.

- Plastic, recreational or ornamental purpose, in which the discourse is indicated by the aesthetic rhetoric and the recreational rhetoric that invite the subject to contemplate and play.

- Perverse purpose, whose discursive modalities – sensationalist, violent, aberrant, morbid, scatological and pornographic – are based on the practice of deviation from the conscience, its rhetoric is of perturbation, provocation, speculation and devaluation of the subject, acting as social catalysts, escape from the conscience which cause wrong behaviour in subjects with low moral resistance. (VILCHIS, 1999: 46-53)

Visual text is a construction that presents itself as a totality of sense immersed in the "*phronesis*" as an ideal and practical knowledge oriented toward a concrete situation in which it receives the circumstances of a need to say something to someone and, based on ability (*dynamis*) and the possible conditions of theoretic knowledge (*sophia*), constructs, based on a system of significant units, the multiple meanings that structure the totality.

The disposition of the visual signs that composed the designed, give it its peculiar semantic characterization, and phenomenally determine the qualities of its semiosis manifested in an agreement with messages that presume an analogous intention. This is why the phenomenon of semiosis can only be understood when the factors of its being are defined, integrated in an interpretative process that transcends the subjectivity of taste, the aesthetic experiences and the sensitive approach.

Alternatives to Understanding the Designed

Visual text comprises a specific series of tropes that produce contrasts expressed and identified in the visual text, which due to being a cultural product, is immersed in social, anthropologic, axiological and epistemological situations that produce contrasts between the diversity of designed objects.

The projection of the trope that differentiates between simple and complex objects lies in the codes that form visual text and allude to the elements: form, colour, letter and image, each of them *per se* can constitute a simple object or a language in itself, like photographic images, but its conjunction articulates a complex object.

The difference between relationships is determined especially by iconicity and figurativity, the first corresponds to the level of realism of the visual text compared with the object that it represents, and the second indicates the values of morphological representation of the real objects or of beings from the imagination that are known through visual perception.

The trope that refers to the relationship between subject and object depends above all on contextual condition that make the appearance of the object itself change, the contextual complex is constituted by perceptual elements internal and external to the visual text, by the semantic universe to which a discourse or a genre in which it is manifested belongs, by the spatiotemporal circumstances that may influence the mediacy or immediacy of the communicative situation.

In the visual text of any graphic design, an existence linked to the context and, therefore, to the multiple discursive responses that it might manifest from its relationship with what is real, must be acknowledged. Thus, the notion of discourse is linked to the concept of text, which is why it is possible to understand it through analysis units – grammar of visual text – or through the set of procedures that determine a continuum.

We speak, then, of the comprehension of text syntactic and perceptive properties of the image, based on the concepts of unit and coherence; in these terms, the analysis of visual text can be elaborated with the theories of:

- Visual literacy, analysis of the image through syntactic relationships of the signs that integrate it, understood here from its superficial levels to the deepest levels, including discursive qualities, generic definitions, integration of codes and subcodes, and visual grammar.
- Iconism, analysis of the image in its relationship with reality that refers to the conditions of imitation, repetition, mimesis, creation, re-presentation of graphic representation
- Isotropies, analysis of the image through images that are equal to a specific space, understood as a type of functional geography of the graphic codes as these are defined in relation to a certain property or condition of the communication, this way defining a certain directionality, action and function of the part with the whole, this way creating metagraphs.
- Contexts, analysis of the reality that surrounds a sign, an act of visual perception or a discourse, either as knowledge of the receivers, as physical space, as a set of objects, as environmental conditions or as an activity. The context is constituted by all the visual and non-visual mediations of expression, likewise, as a totality, because of the complete situation that surrounds an image and determines the sense. The reference and the analysis of the total context show what is implicit in it, what is interpreted and then integrated to what is explicit – the designed – this way specifying its sense.

Conclusions

To understand the different phenomena of graphic design, one must begin with the identification of the semantic field of each of these phenomena, since they correspond to different fields of knowledge and, therefore, to different languages; if we understand that each semantic field shapes the specific limits for naming, explaining and understanding the aspect of the world that one wishes to explain, it becomes clear that the possibility conditions of knowing each of the graphically designed objects involve specific categories that allow mediating between the disciplinary semantic field and the interdisciplinary one, this way sustaining the pertinence of any affirmation or argumentation. Graphic design cannot be accurately understood if the existence and consequences of the semantic fields are not understood.

Graphic semantic repertoires – equivalent to nouns and adjectives in linguistic grammar, and understood here in terms of «graphs» and their combining rules, emerge directly from the semantic field, they are not necessarily forms or properties, they can be understood as semantic units of which it is necessary to understand the set of articulatory dispositions, epistemological intervals whose indicators can correspond to the so-called units that Umberto Eco uses to define the semantic courses whose starting point is sign manifested through expressive units that establish multidimensional topologic links integrated by semantic fields or axes (ECO, 1978: 128-130), an intentional interrelation that includes conceptual crossroads and involves connotational connections.

The previous gives rise to a continuous semantic movement based on which the transformation of the visual sign of any graphic elements is understood, from the minimum most simple one, like the point, to the visual complex of a graphic discourse, it is the use of the visual world as a semiotic device in which the designed is meaning, for which precise codes and possible messages are orchestrated within the context of visual grammar, of graphic discourses and of the conditions of production and reproduction, these codes associate graphic signifiers with their signified thus constituting the sense of a communication.

Graphic design cannot be explained through the notions of language, phrase and immutability (SAUSSURE, 1965: 109-117), it must be understood through the dimensions that are analogous to the concepts of speech, mutability and paradigmatic condition, because visual language is a system of signs that, in addition of arbitrariness, is character- ized by alteration and constant significance, the principle of morphologic, typographic and chromatic continuity is only valid in conceptual primitives since its codification an materialization have a permanent displacement.

The socio-cultural factors that transfer in every moment the signified and signifier relationships are not control in the visual text; the continuity of the visual sign is intimately linked to its spatiotemporal modification.

Based on the understanding of the phenomenon of meaning in graphic design, it must be understood, based on the principles of the semiotic of meaning of Barthes and Eco (MOUNIN, 1970: 12-17), that it is not limited, as is the semiotic of communication, to perceivable facts associated with states of con- science, that is, intentional communication, but rather to any significant event that is understood as a sign phenomenon – which expands the communication to all significant event.

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Professor in Posgraduate Program of National School of Visual Arts in National Autonomous University of Mexico. Pioneer in Mexico using digital resources in arts and design. First woman director of National School of Visual Arts at UNAM (2002-2006), has published four books about Graphic Design Theory, Graphic Design Metodology, Non-linear languages semiotics and Graphic Design Hermeneutics, 32 research papers and 18 di- dactic manuals. Manager from two diferent firms: a technologic center and a graphic design place. Teacher during 30 years, is oficial tutor from postgraduate program in the lines of researching projects, semiotic and hermeneutic studies; participating in academic events in Mexico, Dominicana Republic, USA, Canada, Greece, Spain, Cuba, Peru, Holland, Uruguay, Argentina, Germany and Prtugal and presenting conferences in Mexico, Panama, Cuba, Spain, USA, Lisbon and other countries; also, being advisor thesis from more than 120 researching student thesis works in different universities. Professional graphic designer, working in Mexico, USA and Canada in firms like BMG Entertainment, Environmental Law Institute or UNESCO in traditional and digital way. Visual artist, has exposed digital art, collage and visual poetry in more than 30 exhibitions in Mexico, Panama, USA, Rusia, Spain, France, Greece, Palestine and Frankfurt.

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